

# Documentation of Tai Ahom Manuscripts: Digital Archiving of Dead Language

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## ABSTRACT

Tai Ahom language is an extinct language only practice during the cultural events or rituals of Ahom people. Endangered archives programme of British library is one of the major initiatives taken for the documentation and archiving endangered heritages of all over the world. A project, namely "Documenting, conserving and archiving the Tai Ahom manuscripts of Assam" is an initiative of British Library where total 55 manuscripts collections' containing 474 individual manuscripts with 15088 images of Sibsagar district of Assam was digitally archived. The study describes various attributes of those collected manuscripts. Analysis of the study shows that most of the manuscripts were created during 18<sup>th</sup> century in Tai and Assamese language. Various historical, astrological, spiritual writings of our forefathers are there. Some are fortune telling manuscripts, Mantras, Religious prayers are there in the manuscripts.

**Keywords:** Ahom dynasty; Tai language; Assamese language; Manuscripts; Digital archiving; Documentation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 1228, a group of Tai people came to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Some local people joined them afterwards and formed an ethnic group named as The Ahom or Tai-Ahom. The Ahom kingdom (1228AD-1826AD) was established under the leadership of Sukaphaa with his followers. Till the 17<sup>th</sup> century, original Ahom language and some religious practices were among this ethnic group but later Assamese language was adopted by the Ahom court<sup>1</sup>. The culture of original Tai and local Tibeto-Burman people has changed with time and modern ahom people are using a syncretised version of their old cultures in Assam. Some of the originally Tibeto-Burman local ethnic groups completely transformed into the Ahom community. Local people were accepted on Ahom community on the basis their talents and now they have almost 1.3 million people in Assam and Lohit District of Arunachal Pradesh and considered as the largest Tai group in India<sup>2</sup>. Ahom language is an extinct language which was written in Tai Ahom script. But Ahom was the active and most preferred language during Ahom Dynasty<sup>3</sup>. However, Use of Tai Ahom language is not observed among Ahom community nowadays. It is observed that Ahom community use the language only for some religious practices. Among 8 million Ahom descendent people, very limited no. of people speaks Tai Ahom on regular basis but it seems that they too have only bounded linguistic knowledge of it. The old Ahom language is surviving only in some of the preserved manuscripts. According to history, in 13<sup>th</sup> century Ahom script was adopted by people from Old Mon or Old Burmese before moving to the Brahmaputra valley. Ahom manuscripts reflect some cultural and historical value<sup>2</sup>. Assamese is an

Eastern Indo-Aryan language that is officially by more than 14 million people of Assam. It is believed that Assamese was evolved from the middle Indo-Aryan Magadhi Prakrit before 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>.

## 2. TAI AHOM MANUSCRIPTS

Ahom people are not using Ahom script now but it has cultural significance so sometimes it is use for religious purpose and literary use. Study of Tai Ahom manuscripts gives an idea of its original traditions and cultures. In 2015, when Unicode 8.0 standard was released, Ahom script was added there. Ahom scripts are found in manuscripts where historical records of 600 year-old Ahom Dynasty is available and these are considered as very authentic sources of history. Manuscripts also helps in understanding a dead language. The manuscripts of Ahom period is available in Tai language which is considered as an extinct or dead language now<sup>6</sup>. These literary valuable manuscripts were written on Sasi (Aquillaria Agallocha, tree bark) that are available in Tai language<sup>7</sup>. These manuscripts are the main sources to build some idea on various aspects of traditional Ahom life and it is creating a community identity of Ahom people.

## 3. ENDANGERED ARCHIVES PROGRAMME OF BRITISH LIBRARY: DOCUMENTING, CONSERVING AND ARCHIVING THE TAI AHOM MANUSCRIPTS OF ASSAM

The endangered archives programme (EAP) is a blessing for the resources which are in danger of destruction, neglect or physical deterioration around the world. Since 2004, this programme is digitizing over seven million images of include rare printed sources, manuscripts, visual materials and 25 thousand sound tracks. Projects taken under this program

from any location of world can be explored from <https://eap.bl.uk/>. The Ahom Manuscripts Project was awarded on 2010 under which they have digitised and documented the literary heritages of Ahom Kingdom. Almost 474 Ahom manuscripts written on Tai and Assamese language were catalogued by using some updated standards of digital imaging. After archiving, these manuscripts are currently digitally preserved at the British Library of United Kingdom; the Institute for Tai Studies and Research situated at Moran, Assam; Gauhati University, a state university of Assam and Dibrugarh University, another state university of Assam, India. Grant holder of the project is Dr Stephen Morey, La Trobe University<sup>8</sup>. A list of Ahom manuscripts collection with some basic details is given in (Annexure I).

**4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY**

Manuscripts are heritage of society. Manuscripts reflect the ideology, culture, religious views of our ancestors. For this study Tai Ahom manuscripts documented and archived by British Library was selected with an aim to bring into focus of stake holders and data of documented manuscript was collected from webpage of Endangered Archives Programme of British Library (<https://doi.org/10.15130/EAP3730>). Present study was conducted with some structured objectives, these are as follows:

- Objective 1: To know Creation period of the documented manuscripts
- Objective 2: To know Subject-wise distribution of Manuscripts
- Objective 3: Language-wise distribution of documented manuscripts
- Objective 4: To know the origin of the documented manuscripts.

**5. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

East Brahmaputra valley was ruled by Ahom Dynasty from 13<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries where Tai language was actively speaking by Ahom people at that period. Total 474 manuscripts was digitised under 55 collections with total 15088 TIFF images. 74.54 per cent of the total collections of manuscripts were created during 18<sup>th</sup> century. 5.45 per cent manuscripts were created during 19<sup>th</sup> Century. 3.63 per cent of manuscripts are written during 20<sup>th</sup> Century. From this analysis it can be said that creation of manuscript was gradually decreasing with time. It may because of the evolution of print media, which is also about to take over by digital media. (Fig. 1).

Ahom manuscripts created during 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century were generally about various religious, astrological, cultural, historical facts. Total 107 manuscripts of total 474 manuscripts were consist of different ‘Mantras’ about cure of snake bite, calling spirits, mantras of different pujas, mantras to purify water for bathing etc. Thirty manuscripts are on astrological calculations. 117 manuscripts consist of various historical facts of Ahom dynasty, creation of universe, different stories related to flood, marriage of history. There are some dictionaries Tai and other language. 1 manuscript consist of Song and other 2 manuscript consist of poetic literature. Cultural writings on ‘No-khuwa celebration’ are available. 7 manuscripts consist of Medical remedies for some diseases. 16 manuscripts can’t be categorised due to its physical condition. There are some folios available, which are categorised as practice manuscripts because it was consist of some practicing literatures. 25 manuscripts are categorised as General, because it is consist of different fragments and each folio consist of different issues (Fig. 2).

All collected manuscripts are written in Tai, Assamese or both the language. Out of total 55 collections, 4 collections are only in Assamese language which consist of 15 individual manuscript and 477 images, 41 collections are only in Tai language consisting 245 individual manuscripts with 8145 images and remaining 10 manuscripts are either on Tai or Assamese language with 214 manuscripts with 6466 images (Table 1).

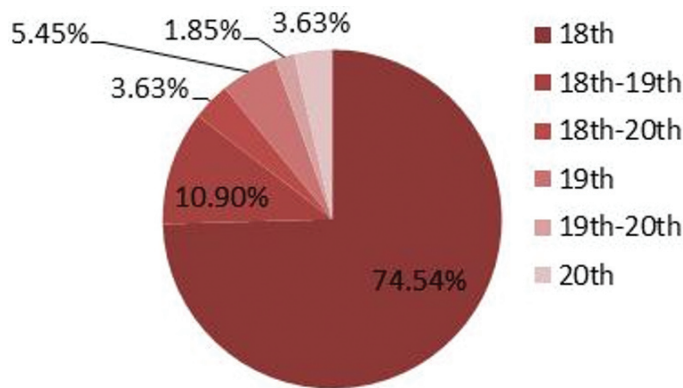


Figure 1. Distribution of manuscript on the basis of creation time.

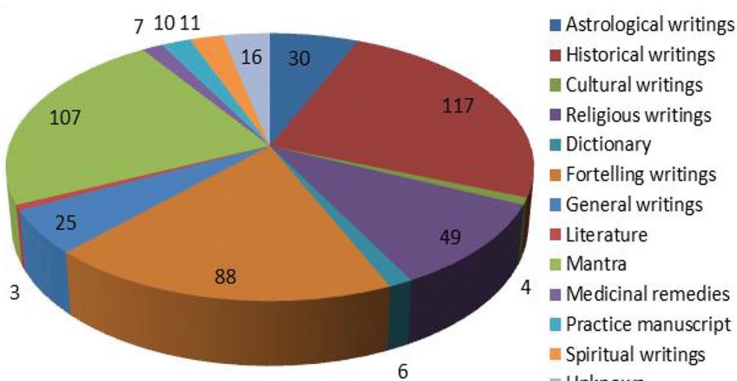


Figure 2. Subject-wise distribution of manuscript.

Table 1. Distribution of manuscript on the basis of language

Language	No. of total collection	No. of total manuscript	No. of total Tiff image
Assamese	4	15	477
Tai	41	245	8145
Tai and Assamese	10	214	6466
Total	55	474	15088

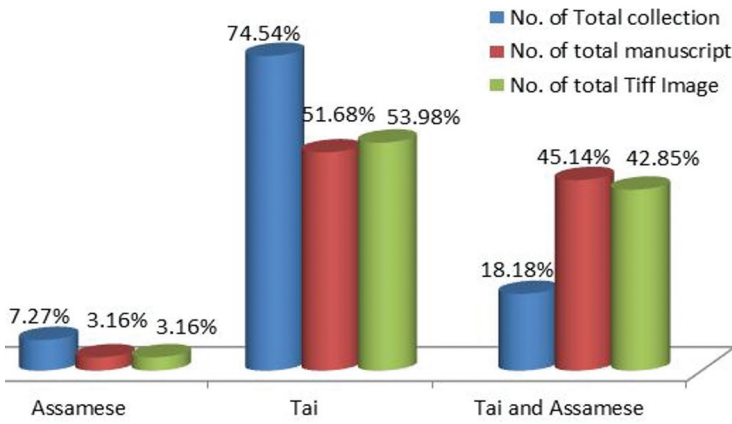


Figure 3. Distribution of manuscript on the basis of language.

Table 2. Origin of documented manuscripts

Origin of manuscript	Total collection	Assamese	Tai	Both	Tiff image
Akhoiya	3	0	2	1	2057
Amguri	5	1	4	0	1351
Bantung nagar	1	0	1	0	301
Batbari	1	0	1	0	18
Boiragibor	1	0	1	0	69
Bokata	14	2	8	4	3925
Deodhai gaon	1	0	1	0	181
ITSAR, Moran	1	0	0	1	835
Japi Hujiya	3	0	3	0	467
Lakwa	1	0	1	0	394
Mahmara	2	0	2	0	518
Mazgaon	5	0	3	2	1485
Namti	1	1	0	0	116
Nijkhaloi ghugura	2	0	2	0	348
Patsaku	8	0	7	1	1434
Ru kang gaon	3	0	3	0	378
Simoluguri	3	0	2	1	1211
Total	55	4	41	10	15088

Out of total manuscripts collection only 7.27 per cent is on Assamese language consisting 3.16 per cent of total individual manuscript with 3.16 per cent images, 74.54 per cent is on Tai language consisting 51.68 per cent of total individual manuscript with 53.98 per cent images and 18.18 per cent is on either Tai or Assamese language consisting 45.14 per cent of total individual manuscript with 42.85 per cent images of total image (Fig. 3).

Ahom people are found mostly in upper Assam the southern

and northern part of Brahmaputra river, Karbi Anglong and very limited area of Arunachal Pradesh. The manuscript documented and archived in this project is generally originated in Sibsagar district of Assam. The original location of manuscript (language-wise) is given on the list (Table 2).

Most of the manuscripts are originally from Bokata with 25.55 per cent of total collection and tiff images of manuscripts from this location is also in highest position with 26.01 per cent followed by Patsaku, Amguri, Mazgaon. Lakwa and Namti have the lowest no. of manuscript from this location i.e., 1.81 per cent (Fig. 4). From Namti, Bokata and Amguri 100 per cent, 14.28 per cent and 20 per cent of Assamese manuscript is originated respectively. From Japi Hujiya, Ru kang gaon, Mahmara, Nijkhaloi ghugura, Bantung nagar, Batbari, Boiragibor, Deodhai gaon and Lakwa 100 per cent of manuscript of Tai language is originated. From ITSAR, Moran 100 per cent manuscripts are originated in both the language (Fig. 5).

6. MAJOR FINDINGS

- It was observed that creations of manuscripts are gradually decreasing with time since most of the manuscripts were created during 18th century
- There are 474 individual manuscripts with total 15088 TIFF images included in those 55 collections
- Out of total 474 manuscripts, 30 manuscripts were on Astrology. Similarly, 117, 4, 49, 6, 88, 25, 3, 107, 7, 10, 11, 16 manuscripts are on history, culture, religion, dictionary, fortune telling writings, general, literature, mantra, medicinal remedies, practice manuscript, spiritual writings respectively
- There are some manuscripts consisting ‘Mantras’ for different situation like snake biting, spirit calling, purifying water for bathing, cure of diseases, pujas, calling God-Goddess etc.
- Manuscripts related to creation of calendar were also documented
- Some fortunes telling manuscripts are also available where different forms of images were used for assuming any good or bad happenings of that period of time 18
- Manuscripts are available which is consisting of religious prayers
- Most of the manuscripts are on Tai language
- Manuscripts were originated in Sibsagar districts of Assam
- In Gauhati University and Institute for Tai Studies and Research (ITSAR, Moran), copies of these manuscripts are preserved for future use
- Accesses of the manuscripts are limited for research purposes only due to its physical condition
- All the manuscripts were possessed by the owner from their forefathers.

7. CONCLUSIONS

21<sup>st</sup> century is opening so many windows for us to preserve our heritages with different new innovative ideas for our next generations. Manuscripts are the carriers of our history, documentation and archiving of manuscripts is like saving our

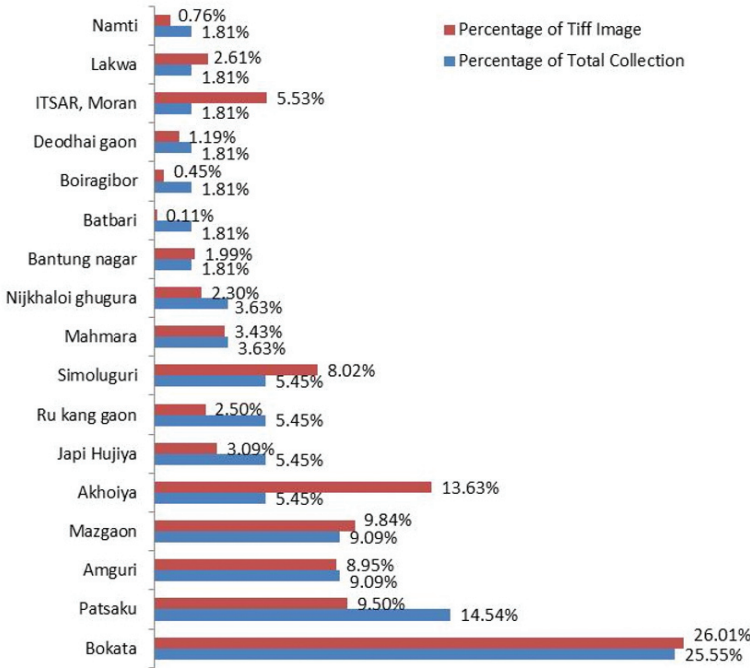


Figure 4. Origin-wise distribution of total collection and TIFF images.

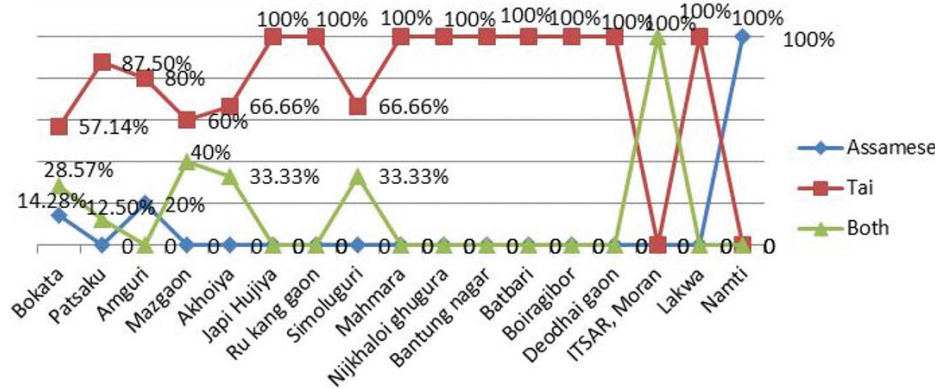


Figure 5. Origin-wise distribution of different languages manuscripts.

own identity for future. “EAP: DCATAMA” is one of major initiative to preserve the dead language like Tai. There are various heritages in our society, which we are neglecting today but may have a greater use for future. We as a stakeholder can take initiative to preserve all the important resources with some depth study and research about documenting and archiving of knowledge. Govt. or Non-Govt. organisations should focus on this area to bring some more innovative and interesting projects to archive our heritages.

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### CONTRIBUTOR

**Ms Nilakshi Sharma** is a research scholar of department of Library and Information Science of Mizoram University currently pursuing PhD from 2019. She have completed her MLISc from Gauhati University and cleared UGC NET in 2018. Contribution in the current study: framed the objectives, collected data, analysed and presented in this study with an aim to welcome the attention of stakeholders towards the documentation and preservation of our own literary heritages.

### Annexure I

**List of Ahom manuscripts collection with some basic details**

Reference No.	Collection record	Language	Date of creation (Century)	Total no. of Tiff image	Total no. of manuscript
EAP373/1	Ajoy Mohan Collection	Tai	18th	491	14
EAP373/2	Ananta Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	128	2
EAP373/3	Baparam Hati Baruah Collection	Tai/Assamese	18th	225	4
EAP373/4	Bhim Kanta Phukan Collection	Tai/Assamese	18th	997	42
EAP373/5	Bhoba Baruah Collection	Tai	18th	284	7
EAP373/6	Bhola Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	160	3
EAP373/7	Bhuban Boruah Collection	Tai	18th	54	1
EAP373/8	Bidya Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	437	9
EAP373/9	Bimal Baruah Collection	Tai	18th	274	8
EAP373/10	Bogadhar Phukan Collection	Tai	19th-20th	33	1
EAP373/11	Budheshwar Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	181	4
EAP373/12	Central Tai Academy Collection	Tai	18th	130	9
EAP373/13	Chandra Mohan Collection	Tai/Assamese	18th	105	5
EAP373/14	Dhamen Mohan Boruah Collection	Tai	18th-19th	152	10
EAP373/15	Dhiren Boruah Collection	Tai	18th	112	3
EAP373/16	Dhormendra Boruah Collection	Tai	19th	61	1
EAP373/17	Dibya Chetia Collection	Tai	18th	74	2
EAP373/18	Dulen Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	366	11
EAP373/19	Durlov Mohan Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	301	6
EAP373/20	Gileshwar Bailung Collection	Tai	18th	316	5
EAP373/21	Hara Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	387	21
EAP373/22	Haranath Mohan Collection	Assamese	18th	103	4
EAP373/23	Harichandra Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	102	2

Reference No.	Collection record	Language	Date of creation (Century)	Total no. of Tiff Image	Total no. of manuscript
EAP373/24	Institute of Tai Studies and Research Collection	Tai/Assamese	18th	835	28
EAP373/25	Jibeshwar Phukan Collection	Tai/Assamese	18th	1418	33
EAP373/26	Junaram Sangbun Phukan Collection	Tai	18th-20th	419	14
EAP373/27	Kamol Boruah Collection	Tai	18th-20th	153	5
EAP373/28	Kamol Rajkonwar Collection	Tai	18th	394	11
EAP373/29	Kesab Boruah Collection	Tai	18th	638	17
EAP373/30	Khanin Hati Baruah Collection	Tai	18th	195	6
EAP373/31	Krishna Mohan Collection	Tai	19th	64	1
EAP373/32	Manik Bailung Collection	Assamese	19th	116	1
EAP373/33	Manuranjan Phukan Collection	Tai/Assamese	18th-19th	81	3
EAP373/34	Medini Mohan Collection	Tai	18th-19th	24	4
EAP373/35	Mohendra Baruh Collection	Tai	18th	84	1
EAP373/36	Mohendrajit Boruah Collection	Tai	18th-19th	66	2
EAP373/37	Munindra Phukan Collection	Tai/Assamese	18th-19th	328	20
EAP373/38	Nipen Mohan Collection	Tai	18th	62	2
EAP373/39	Nogen Buragohain Collection	Tai	20th	18	1
EAP373/40	Padma Sang Bun Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	140	2
EAP373/41	Paniram Gogoi Collection	Assamese	18th	26	1
EAP373/42	Parijat Mohan Baruah Collection	Tai	18th	202	2
EAP373/43	Prodip Baruah Collection	Tai/Assamese	18th	428	10
EAP373/44	Puspa Mohan Collection	Tai	18th	188	7
EAP373/45	Rupeshwar Boruah Collection	Tai	18th	126	1
EAP373/46	Sandicharan Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	86	1
EAP373/47	Soilen Nath Konwar Collection	Tai	18th	24	1
EAP373/48	Sosti Mohan Collection	Assamese	20th	232	9
EAP373/49	Susen Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	69	2
EAP373/50	Tapudhar Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	182	3
EAP373/51	Tilleshwar Mohan Collection	Tai/Assamese	18th	596	17
EAP373/52	Toilen Mohan Collection †	Tai	18th	295	12
EAP373/53	Tulen Phukan Collection	Tai	18th	176	5
EAP373/54	Tulsi Boruah Collection	Tai	18th-19th	497	26
EAP373/55	Tulsi Phukan Collection	Tai/Assamese	18th	1453	52
Total				15088	474

Data source: <https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP373>